

## History and Artistry in *The Plough and the Stars*

RONALD AYLING

SEAN O'Casey's mastery of stage-craft is particularly well demonstrated in *The Plough and the Stars*, and not least in its unobtrusive artistry. There is a seemingly haphazard arrangement of scenes and an arbitrary choice of details within the four-act structure. The narrative has the casual formlessness of life. People come and go in the public house in Act II; leave and then return to the tenement block in Act III. One influential early critic complained that the play's form was "embodied in a jumbled memory of rather confused events".<sup>1</sup> Exactly; such an impression was deliberately sought by O'Casey, though he also intended — and, I think, successfully realised — a definite moral pattern, a coherent attitude to emerge from the chaos. The clash of personalities and of ideas, the reversal of values, the balance and juxtaposition of dialogue and scenes: all are carefully orchestrated into a symphony in four movements.

Critics in London and New York seem to have taken the work at its face value, however, when it was first shown in those cities in 1926 and 1927. Reviewing the first production of the play in London, for instance, the dramatic critic of *The Spectator* regarded it as "crude stuff" which was clearly inferior to *Juno and the Paycock*; he "found the characters overdrawn, and the dialogue cumbersome. Indeed, it is not so much a play at all as four pictures of low Dublin life during the blackest chapter of Anglo-Irish history."<sup>2</sup> And in an article written the following year Joseph Wood Krutch, reviewing productions of *Juno* and

*The Plough* that had been recently presented in New York, said that O'Casey's plays.

lack form, lack movement, and in the final analysis lack any informing purpose. They bustle with characters, generally amusing enough in themselves, but the series of sketches which go to make up one of his dramas is strung upon the skimpiest thread of melodramatic action, and though each of his plays has its moments neither of the two seen here produces any unified or lasting effect.

And of *The Plough*, in particular, he wrote in the same article:

To this day I do not know just where the author's sympathies lie, and I defy anyone, after six months have passed, to recall the play in any form except that embodied in a jumbled memory of rather confused events.<sup>3</sup>

Milton Waldman's reactions to the London premiere were more perceptive in general but still wide of the mark in specific emphasis. He disliked the playwright's episodic technique, for one thing, and objected to the apparent lack of historical perspective or proportion (Krutch's "informing purpose"?) in the treatment of the Irish "Troubles":

Apparently [O'Casey] sees the sequence of revolutionary episodes as one vast drama, and from it selects for his own purposes dramatic episodes which he places against a shrewdly observed background of Irish proletarian life. This would seem to explain the very real lack of structure. . . . He himself sees so clearly a beginning, an end, and a middle in recent Irish history, that he conceives it unnecessary to stress these dramatic props in the segments of that history which he chooses to dramatise.<sup>4</sup>

The play, in other words, fails on even a documentary level. This strange criticism deserves refutation in some detail, for any detailed analysis on these lines demonstrates the brilliance of the work on the primary level of narrative, of stage presentation of historical events. We tend to take for granted the way O'Casey entertainingly yet purposefully manipulates well-known national events — putting them at one time in the foreground and at another in the background of the drama — and dovetails them into his own fictional narrative, the story of the Clitheroe household and their tenement neighbours.

*The Plough* is extremely well documented without being overladen by historical and political details. The writer skilfully selected sufficient material to give spectators a well-rounded (if subjective) picture of the 1916 Rising and the course of circumstances that led up to it, and at the same time evoked something of the immediacy and excitement of documentary drama. We are shown the contentious social and political circumstances of the time: the dissensions within the national consciousness — in detailed and concrete terms — and the underlying patriotic and religious emotions of the people, to which the Platform Speaker appeals in Act II. The preparations for insurrection are briefly sketched: we hear of a reconnaissance attack on Dublin Castle in Act I, and the public meeting in the second act is part of a recruiting drive for the Irish Volunteers as well as an incitement to further civil upheaval. In acts III and IV, the military progress of the week-long Rising is followed from the beginning in the occupation by the “rebels” of the General Post Office in O’Connell Street to the end in its imminent recapture by the forces of the Crown.

The following exchange, telescoped from a scene near the beginning of Act III, conveys a seemingly muddled jumble of momentous and inconsequential news. The details are carefully selected, however, to accord with the characters in the scene, the need to give the minimum of essential information (the “dramatic props” which Waldman denies finding in the play) about the start of the armed “rebellion”, and to depict the historical incident in a lively way as though it was taking place before our eyes. Notice how O’Casey makes Mrs. Gogan give her side of the story first, though she herself hasn’t seen anything of the action and adds nothing to what we are told by the other characters. There is a reason for this. We are by this time, half-way through the play, used to her exaggerated fantasies of violence and death and do not take them seriously. Confirmation of her account by the firsthand reports of

the two men thus confounds our expectations and serves to emphasize how everything has suddenly been turned upside-down by the unexpected turn of events. There has been so much talk of violent action earlier in the play, and so much empty ranting and boasting by characters whose ineffectuality we take for granted, that somehow we never expect the rhetoric to be realised — a reflection how, in Ireland of 1916, too used to verbal violence, the reality of revolution took the majority of people by surprise. Strange and hideous things are happening, indeed, when Mrs. Gogan's eschatological visions coincide with reality!

*Mrs. Gogan:* Oh, here's th' Covey an' oul' Pether hurryin' along. God Almighty, s'hrange things is happenin' when them two is pullin' together. . . . *(to the two men)* Were yous far up th' town? . . . . How is things lookin'? I hear they're blazin' away out o' th' G.P.O. That th' Tommies is sthretched in heaps around Nelson's Pillar an' th' Parnell Statue, an' that th' pavin' sets in O'Connell Street is nearly covered be pools o'blood. . . .

*The Covey:* . . . You can't stick your nose into O'Connell Street, an' Tyler's is on fire.

*Peter:* An' we seen th' Lancers —

*Covey:* *(interrupting)* Throttin' along, heads in th' air; spurs an' sabres jinglin', an' lances quiverin', an' lookin' as if they were assin' themselves, "Where's these blighters, till we get a prod at them," when there was a volley from th' Post Office that sthretched half o' them, an' sent th' rest gallopin' away wonderin' how far they'd have to go before they'd feel safe.

*Peter:* *(rubbing his hands):* "Damn it," says I to meself, "this looks like business."

*Covey:* An' then out comes General Pearse an' his staff, an', standin' in th' middle o' th' street, he reads th' Proclamation.

*Mrs. Gogan:* What proclamation?

*Peter:* Declarin' an Irish Republic.

*Mrs. Gogan:* Go to God!

*Peter:* The gunboat *Helga's* shellin' Liberty Hall, an' I hear th' people livin' on the quays had to crawl on their bellies to Mass with th' bullets that were flyin' around from Boland's Mills.

*Mrs. Gogan:* God bless us, what's goin' to be th' end of it all!<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the touches of humour, the growing seriousness of the situation is clearly depicted. A hint of casualness is suggested in the approach of the Lancers, but this is swiftly dispelled; the image of the bullet-strafed quays — still leavened by laughter in the way it is described — shows the battle hotting up. This impression is confirmed soon afterwards by the distant sound of cannon-fire:

- Fluther:*           What th' hell's that?  
*The Covey:*       It's like th' boom of a big gun!  
*Fluther:*           Surely to God they're not goin' to use  
                           artillery on us?  
*The Covey:*       (*scornfully*) Not goin'! (*Vehemently*) Would-  
                           n't they use anythin' on us, man?  
*Fluther:*           Aw, holy Christ, that's not playin' th' game!  
   (*C.P., I, 223.*)

Almost immediately, Bessie Burgess bursts in upon the men with the news that large-scale looting of shops is taking place in the centre of the city. They hurry off to get a few things for themselves. The subsequent entrance of Clitheroe and Brennan with the badly wounded Langon shows the insurgents retreating to their central positions, surrounded by the military forces.

Act IV is mostly concerned with the civilian situation, the deaths of Mollser and Bessie and the madness of Nora. We see from the beginning of the act, though, the burning of the centre of the city, and hear of the gradual advance of the army on the rebels' strongholds; as these fall — the destruction of the Imperial Hotel is symptomatic — many of the insurgents attempt to escape through the military cordon as non-combatants while others continue the fight as snipers. The climax is reached at the end of the play: "In the distance is heard a bitter burst of rifle and machine-gun fire, interspersed with the boom, boom of artillery. The glare in the sky seen through the window flares into a fuller and a deeper red," and Sergeant Tinley announces: "There gows the general attack on the Powst Office" (*Ibid.*, 261.).

In these scenes the telescoping of events is skilfully accomplished, and the illusion of a progressive break-down of order and of a growing intensification of the battle is graphically created. On the whole, the course of events is with two exceptions fairly accurately followed. The first exception concerns the looting, which took place from the very first day — indeed, as soon as it became known that the police and armed forces had been withdrawn from the centre of the city, then in the hands of the Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army. One would perhaps infer from O’Casey’s narrative — though he is careful not to limit the action of Act III to any *one* specific day during the week-long Rising — that the looting followed the shelling of Liberty Hall by the *Helga*, some days after the military action had commenced. Presumably, O’Casey wanted to stress the progressive deterioration of law and order in the course of the rebellion by showing the looting at a later stage in the action. The second exception is in the use of artillery which was brought into action as early as the second day (Tuesday, April 25th); again, by giving the impression that the big guns were not used until later, the playwright more graphically illustrates the hotting up of the conflict. In fact, the occupation of the G.P.O. took place on Easter Monday, April 24th, and the reading of the proclamation, the charge of the Lancers, and looting in Lower Sackville Street took place on the same day. Artillery was first used against the “rebels” on Tuesday, and further looting occurred in the vicinity of Nelson’s Pillar, but martial law was not officially proclaimed until that evening. More troops and artillery were brought into action on Wednesday, April 26th and the gunboat *Helga* bombarded Liberty Hall. According to the pro-British *Irish Times*, however,

Bad as the previous day had been, the crisis reached its climax on Thursday and Friday. Artillery was brought into play at every point, and the air reverberated with nerve-wracking explosions. All day long the bombardment continued unceasingly, and each night the centre of the city was illuminated with great conflagrations.<sup>6</sup>

The leaders of the Rising surrendered on Saturday, April 29th, though some of their men in scattered outposts continued to resist for some time afterwards, and there was spasmodic sniping for a further day or two.

On the documentary level, therefore, *The Plough* is carefully constructed, and with its flexibility of setting (both exterior and interior) and its rich diversity of action, it affords great scope for the film and television as well as the stage director. Without violating O'Casey's plot in any way, there is a wealth of visual detail for the camera to record and much opportunity for the picking out of significant details, though, clearly, the work was written for the stage and is best performed under theatrical conditions. The march-past of the well-equipped Dublin Fusiliers on their way to Flanders (end of Act I) dissolves into the raggedly provided but proud ranks of Volunteers and Citizen Army men assembling for the "Great Demonstration and torchlight procession" at the beginning of the second act. The mounted Lancers charging down O'Connell Street; the street fighting with comic and pathetic incidents during the looting of the shops; the fall of the Imperial Hotel, where Clitheroe is killed, and the final scenes of the G.P.O. under fire from all sides are some of the many images envisaged in descriptions by the dramatist in the course of the drama. As in any dramatic reconstruction of actuality, of course, it is possible to disagree with the author's presentation as a whole or with particular emphasis — and O'Casey's anti-heroic interpretation was — and is — highly contentious; what is not valid in this case, however, is for critics to say that the historical pattern is either non-existent or is confusingly delineated.

The chronological design was not the only factor that determined the form of the play. O'Casey's continuing concern with the dramatic clash and interaction of public and private worlds of experience also influenced its architecture. Though he cleverly handles the chronicle-play on the public level, the political situation is not his major

theme. His primary interests, of course, lie with the people living in the tenement: their personal and private struggles within the family unit and within the larger tenement community, and the interrelation of the individual conflict and the social upheaval. The settings of the four acts of the play are significant: the first and last acts have particularised domestic settings, while the inner two acts take place in public settings. The play opens in the living quarters of the Clitheroe family. Our interest is directed to the private world of Nora Clitheroe and her struggle to preserve personal values like love, family harmony, and respectability in the face of constant opposition and external pressures. Within her own household she has to control anarchic elements like the lazy habits of, and ignorant bickerings between, the Young Covey, her husband's cousin, and Peter Flynn, her uncle, as well as the selfish egotism of her husband; and, from without, she has to contend with intrusions from inquisitive or aggressive neighbours and try to counter the claims of the Irish Citizen Army upon her husband's time and attention. In the opening scene, the first violent invasion — by Mrs. Burgess — is easily repulsed, and the distracting manoeuvres of the Covey and Peter eventually stopped; but the hard-won conjugal harmony is broken up before the end of the act by the entrance of Brennan, representing a call to arms on behalf of the national independence movement. Nora is successful in combating individual distractions but, however hard she strives, she cannot prevail against the pull of large public affairs and nationalist mass emotion.

The settings for the second and third acts are public and impersonal: the former being a public house with a huge meeting taking place outside it, and the latter a street outside a block of tenement houses. We know that the second act was originally written as a one-act play entitled *The Cooing of Doves* — an ironic title, of course, bearing in mind that it was, as initially conceived, a play “full of



wild discussions and rows in a public house.”<sup>7</sup> At the time it was written O’Casey apparently had no idea of writing a play on the Rising; but when *The Cooing of Doves* was rejected by the Abbey Theatre, he retained his faith in the work and incorporated it into the larger structure of *The Plough*. The position it now holds within the play is significant. After a solidly constructed first act, which introduces us to the difficulties and problems of life in a tenement (a variation upon the theme of the first act of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, though this time it is the situation of a woman that is examined, with Nora taking Davoren’s place at the centre of the scene), the movement of the second act is a surprise. At the end of Act I it looks as though the action will develop on the level of domestic drama; Act II does not advance this theme at all, but — acting in something like the same relation to the first act as a scherzo second movement does in a symphony — proceeds with a swirl of purposeful action to play comic variations on a theme invoked in the earliest scene. Act II in fact realises a sharply-pointed contrast between dream and reality, between the social and abstract values which the Platform Speaker embodies and the irrational emotions exhibited in the quarrelling and love-making within the pub. The drama of impersonal forces gathers momentum, however, at the end of the scene: the Speaker urges the sacrifice of self for country and we see the young patriots prepared to surrender the deepest personal values:

*Clitheroe, Captain Brennan, and Lieut. Langon of the Irish Volunteers enter hurriedly. Captain Brennan carries the banner of The Plough and the Stars, and Lieut. Langon a green, white, and ordange tri-colour. They are in a state of emotional excitement. Their faces are flushed and their eyes sparkle; they speak rapidly, as if unaware of the meaning of what they say. They have been mesmerized by the fervency of the speeches.*

*Clitheroe:* (almost pantingly): Three glasses o’ port!  
(*The Barman brings drinks.*)

*Brennan:* We won’t have long to wait now.

*Langon:* Th’ time is rotten ripe for revolution.

*Clitheroe:* You have a mother, Langon.

*Langon:* Ireland is greater than a mother.

*Brennan:* You have a wife, Clitheroe.  
*Clitheroe:* Ireland is greater than a wife.  
*Langon:* Th' time for Ireland's battle is now — th'  
 place for Ireland's battle is here.

(*C.P.* I, 213.)

The second act concludes with the march-past of the insurgent forces: a defiant "answer", as it were, to the parade of the loyalist troops heard at the end of Act I.

Act III depicts a further stage in the violation of privacy and the disruption of social and family harmony. Nora is unable to prevent Jack's participation in the fighting, and the heightened strife between abstract and personal values is vividly stressed when Jack says, before leaving her, "What are you more than any other woman?" to which she replies hopelessly: "No more, maybe; but you are more to me than any other man, Jack" (*Ibid.*, 235.). It is the essential difference between their two ways of looking at life.

In the fourth act there is a return to an interior and personal setting. Significantly, in accord with the deteriorating social situation, it is a more squalid apartment than that seen in the first act. The Clitheroes are a working-class family, but they have at least three wage-earners in employment (it is not certain whether Nora herself is working, though I tend to think she is employed at the beginning of the drama; if so, that makes four wage packets contributing towards her budget), and Nora has furnished their tenement flat "in a way that suggests an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life" (*Ibid.*, 161). Bessie Burgess is a street vendor whose son is in the Dublin Fusiliers fighting in France; her attic flat, the setting for Act IV, has "a look of compressed confinement", and "an unmistakable air of poverty bordering on destitution" (*Ibid.*, 239). As in Act I it is evening and the room is dimly lit; in each of the two scenes light enters from the world outside through a window at the back of the set. Yet whereas the external light in Act I is associated with peaceful work (it is "the flaring of the flame of a gasoline lamp giving light to workmen repairing the street" outside)

in the last act it is the hideous "glare of the burning buildings in the town", which, by the end of the scene, "flares into a fuller and deeper red." The detailed parallels — and significant differences — are obviously carefully planned: and the dramatic action completes a ghastly cycle of events.

At the very beginning of the play's action Fluther is employed by Nora in fixing a new lock to her flat, and attention is focussed upon this move by Bessie's (no doubt correct) interpretation: "Puttin' a new lock on her door — afraid her poor neighbours ud break through an' steal" (*Ibid.*, 178). In such ways the vulnerable young wife tries vainly to secure her household against troublesome intruders, as, by burning a letter to her husband from the commandant of the Citizen Army, she equally unsuccessfully attempts to protect her home from another external threat to its security. In this sense, Bessie's threat at the end of Act I is ominously relevant: strong locks and innocent love are no match for "th' arrow that flieth be night, or th' sickness that wasteth be day." But if it was difficult for the Nora of Act I to preserve the privacy of her home, it is quite impossible in the final scene of the play for anyone to avoid the impact of external events. Mrs. Burgess's flat is presented as the last refuge in the tenement for those like Fluther, Mrs. Gogan and all from the Clitheroe flat, whose own living quarters are riddled with machinegun fire. In the war conditions now prevailing there can be no privacy whatsoever: at any moment there may be violent invasions, either by "rebels" looking for refuge among the civilians or for vantage points for sniping, or by soldiers hunting snipers and fleeing insurgents. Shots fired through the window from outside kill Bessie Burgess and soldiers with fixed bayonets crash into the room; the scene ends with the enforced evacuation of the civilians and the triumphant and undisputed possession of hearth and home by two soldiers in full battle kit who pour out and drink cups of tea while the curtain falls. The terrifying encroachment of violent, impersonal forces upon the everyday lives

and loves of the tenement-dwellers is a theme sustained throughout the play, imposing a coherent pattern upon the four acts, and building up the action to a climax that is appallingly realistic and yet symbolic at the same time. In Act IV, too, we find another example of the use of reversal of situation, for whereas in Act I Nora is busily engaged in trying to lock Mrs. Burgess out of her life, in Act IV Mrs. Burgess is occupied in trying to prevent life (the fighting outside, the news of Jack Clitheroe's death, and so on) from impinging upon Nora in her demented state. It could also be said that in other subtle ways in the last act, Nora and Bessie exchange their first act roles: it is the drunken Bessie who speaks wildly, almost dementedly in the opening scene of the play, calling upon her son for help while she attacks Nora. In the last act, Nora's speech is similarly disjointed, she calls for her (stillborn) child, and struggles with Bessie when the latter tries to restrain her.

Saros Cowasjee disputes elements of symbolism in the final scene of the play. He says:

Katherine Worth in her endeavour to find symbols and interpret them can go to the extent of saying: "The tenement house in *The Plough and the Stars* becomes so potent an image of Irish life that when the Tommies sit down to make tea in Bessie's room at the end of the play we know that we are watching the occupation of Ireland." This is not so; there is a lot of irony in this scene but no such symbolic meaning.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that by this stage in the play the horror is plainly not limited to any historical or geographical factors for, though there is a skilful use of documentary elements, the drama moves on more than one level, so that the conclusion is more than the defeat of the rebellion or the occupation of Ireland. The curtain scene, like that of *Juno and the Paycock*, contains distinctly symbolic overtones, embodying in concrete terms an experience of universal tragic significance: the all-pervasive power of the life-denying forces in society and the triumph of anarchy and irrationality. Mollser asks early in the drama, "Is there any-

body goin', Mrs. Clitheroe, with a tither o' sense?"; the play's finale leaves no doubt of the answer. Those few who did show signs of trying to stem the advance of madness are now dead or insane themselves. Moreover, the effect of the final scene is not limited to criticism of the brutality of the British troops, who are only a part, albeit a powerful and official part, of a social system that inevitably promotes waste and devastation and incites blind anarchy and rebellion by way of reaction. O'Casey's criticism extends to the destructive elements that accompany poverty and disease — symbolised in the coffin of Mollser that is removed from the stage very shortly before the end of the play — and to the nihilism that has been seen to influence the idealistic motives of the revolutionaries: the Platform Orator of Act II, for instance, on the evidence of his speeches might be content with the extent of the destruction by the end of the drama, for it certainly fulfills his demands for blood-sacrifice on a large scale. Yet the final effect is not confined to satire alone: indeed, the more closely one studies the play the more one appreciates the complexity of the emotional and intellectual responses that are invoked throughout its four acts. Here, from an analysis of stagecraft and documentary features, one may stress once again the range of vision and the depth of human feeling which make it such a powerful play and a fitting climax to the first important phase of O'Casey's drama.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>J. W. Krutch, *The Nation*, cxxv, December 21, 1927, 718.

<sup>2</sup>*The Spectator*, cxxxvi, May 29, 1926, 904.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nation*, cxxv, December 21, 1927, 718.

<sup>4</sup>*London Mercury*, xiv, 81, July 1926, 299.

<sup>5</sup>*The Plough and the Stars*, in *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1949), I, 216-18. All subsequent references are to this text (C.P.).

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in *Dublin 1916*, ed. R. McHugh (London: Arlington Books, 1966), p. 59.

<sup>7</sup>*Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* (London: Macmillan, 1949), p. 128.

<sup>8</sup>S. Cowasjee, *O'Casey* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), p. 47.